

FACT 5:

School Culture and Attitude are Key to Student Success

Findings from the research project:

“Successful School Experiences for Victorian Students with Cerebral Palsy in Local School Communities”¹

KEY MESSAGE: The whole of school culture and attitude are critical to creating an inclusive environment that caters to and values all students at the school.

Leadership from the school, principal and/or vice principal were crucial in the study and spearheaded the values held and enacted by all staff in the school and the school community—students, parents and professionals visiting the school. Schools that were inclusive, welcomed all. While environmental adaptations were important for students to have access to the school in similar way to other students, the attitude of staff was imperative in creating positive and inclusive practices at the school. Schools where students managed well had adopted an open, problem solving attitude within class and across the whole school. Schools tackled the ‘how?’ related to the student’s individual learning, rather than ‘if?’ the student could learn.



“In terms of curriculum and accessing the curriculum, well, we need to see children who are on the program for students with disabilities having success.

Success doesn’t look the same for everyone...we want children to experience the joy of learning, to be curious, to be engaged, to be active, actively learning, to feel that they’re a part of the classroom, that they can ask questions, that they’re not going to experience failure and that they can take risks and they don’t have to get things right all the time.

*So that’s the culture that we want, the learning culture that we want for every child and I think that for a child who has got disabilities, is really, really important. So we have individualised learning programs and that’s the reason we have them.” **Principal***

*“I like most of the stuff at school like the subjects and how I get around places, I quite like it... They have ramps so you can access more areas, when you go to like have lunch...some [places] I can’t [get to] because they might be up a hill or they might be in places that are impossible for me to get to. [But] my school is getting rebuilt... I think it is going to be really exciting, and I can’t wait to use the facilities and it’s going to be great.” **Teenager with CP, spastic quadriplegia—GMFCS level 5***

Conclusions & Recommendations

- 1. Students with cerebral palsy, physical disabilities and complex communication needs can and do attend local schools.** Students make friends, enjoy school, learn alongside their peers and develop a sense of independence and belonging that is highly valued by students and their families. Therefore, the preparation of students and families before school begins, efforts by schools and external agencies, and the dedication and hard work contributed by families are all worthwhile actions and aims. Students should be encouraged to communicate with family and school staff to both identify their needs and find appropriate solutions when issues of access and involvement arise.



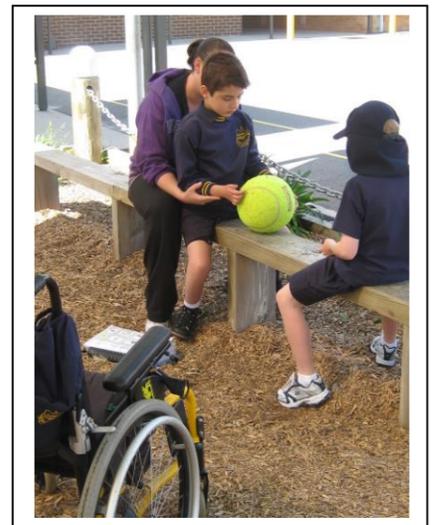
“Peer interaction [is] actually a really key indicator that the child is truly included within the school community. They’re recognised as an individual. They have different ways of communicating and they have a particular role within the classroom. That’s probably one of the key indicators. The fact that they’re happy to get up and go to school is probably another one...peer engagement, that’s probably one of the biggest...[and] teaching staff or the support staff engaging with the child as well. Because I think that really impacts on how included the child feels.” **Occupational therapist**

“[My daughter is] lucky because one of her teachers is in a wheelchair so the whole school has been modified with the exception of the oval...and there’s [student 1] and there’s [student 2], so there’s three of them that are wheelchair users, so the whole school has basically been set up that anyone can get anywhere... it’s actually incredibly wheelchair friendly isn’t it? You go everywhere don’t you? Student: Yes”
Mother & teenager with motor difficulties and Complex Communication Needs

“So the whole community were all involved, there was a little note that when out to the school...a little note from the parents stating that "This is my child, this is how they communicate, this is how they move, this is why"...the [other] parents can read it and go ‘Oh, okay. I don't have to be so scared if I see them, I can just give them a high five in the hallway’. It's not that awkward moment of ‘I don't know what to do’”
Physiotherapist

- 2. Families play a crucial, substantial, ongoing and sometimes difficult role in advocating, organising and navigating the school system on behalf of their child.** With the help of skilled allied health practitioners who know their child, and with structured support from an agency like the Cerebral Palsy Education Centre (CPEC), families can develop skills and contribute substantially to the school’s capability to achieve successful participation. Schools should be well informed to recognise and embrace the role of families in the inclusion of students with disabilities in every practical sense throughout the child’s schooling. Families need to be mindful of school cultures and processes that influence teachers. Parents may offer their knowledge, share skills and provide a reciprocal support to teachers and school staff, particularly during student transitions (into and between schools).

“And there's a big state school just down the hill here which we always had in the back of our minds that [my child] would go there. But when it came to shop around and go and meet with the schools it just didn't fit that well so that's why we opted to go to [current school]...I actually went to the information session at CPEC really early... [CPEC] ran a session about what to expect and how you apply for funding and all this. And it kind of gave me a list of questions or things that I should think about which honestly, I didn't even know about so I'm quite grateful that I went to that. And then I went to a few of the different schools. I sort of arranged to meet the principal and just tried to explain our situation and gauge what interest they had and I really didn't get a good reception at the one down here. It seemed like a bit of a problem for them and they were quite focused around academic results and I thought well, I don't know... But [current school] they were just quite open and they have a Vice Principal who's dedicated to working with the children that need additional assistance...the school itself just feels a bit nicer [in the] community spirit.”
Mother to student with CP, spastic diplegia -GMFCS level 2



3. School leadership is a cornerstone to creating and sustaining whole of school inclusive attitudes that celebrate diversity and difference in the school community. All stakeholders (teachers, aides, parents, students, allied health practitioners) are reliant on strong school leadership to respond to school enrolments, address staff training and need for upskilling, navigate service use and purchase of services that will support the school to include the child, as well as directly assisting the child, and to enable communication and collaboration that enables success for all.

“It’s really important that we work out ways that students can access the curriculum. So we have to be flexible in our thinking...How we’re going to adapt things or come up with different ways to do things at that point of need, so not one size fits all and thinking about what’s the next logical step for that child in their learning. So a lot of time and energy spent around those adaptations of curriculum.” Principal

“Inclusion is about not noticing the disability but focusing on the ability. So in the environment, in the classroom, socially, they’re just one of the kids. We have a team for each child, so say, ‘Team [Child]’ might be two or three integration aides and the classroom teacher and the parent and myself...So inclusion is working together with all of us so that all our thoughts and opinions and ideas get put into that melting pot so that the child is at the centre...it’s challenging sometimes and it hasn’t happened overnight and it doesn’t just happen automatically. It does take an enormous lot of modelling and a lot of the way you use language...the two absolute essentials to making inclusion work. Planning, planning differentiation. The modification of things that need to be modified, to ensure inclusion. A sense of belonging... The planning for friendship, social, emotional growth, the planning for differentiation and modifying what needs to be modified and a team approach. So it takes our whole school to care for our kids.” Principal

“My role is first and foremost, is to work around the culture of the school. The culture that we have in the school reflects what I have been working on with the team over a number of years... that’s the most important thing. Then it’s about the expectations about the culture of the school. So I see it as the big picture and that first and foremost that’s my role in terms of the big picture of what happens across the school, and ensuring that we have a culture and an environment in the school where everyone feels welcome and accepted, and that their child is going to be included like everyone else. And then it’s about having the people and structures in place so that that can be done. So it’s about the selection of staff, it’s about setting up the roles that people have.” Principal

“[The school said] ‘Yes we’ll give it a go, see how it works and if that’s what [child] needs then we’ll try our hardest’ and look that’s all I ask as a parent, just to give it a go. They’ve got about 22 children with special needs there so they’ve got a large staff base, they’ve got about 20 Aides on staff. They’re very inclusive, she’s going to camp, she goes on all the excursions, any type of therapy, they bought her a new toilet, you know, they’re just lovely.”

Mother to student with motor difficulties and Complex Communication Needs

4. Schools cannot build up expertise to assist students alone. Students and school communities often embrace students with disabilities, although physical accessibility, knowledge and use of student’s particular communication methods or needs, and social participation must be carefully addressed through a strategic plan that includes appropriate experts. This may require speech pathologists trained in alternative augmentative communication, occupational therapists trained in technology and switch access, and physiotherapists with expertise in childhood physical disability. Collaborations with the same aim – a successful school experience for the student – should underpin all interactions between schools and external experts and agencies.



“Good inclusion is an openness, a willingness to learn...Just give everything a go. It’s so challenging for schools to fit it all in and those schools that learn and accept we can’t do everything all the time, but we’re doing a pretty good job, are very, very good. That’s very powerful, when they reach that point. Inclusion’s awesome when it works. It’s awesome and it’s so exciting being out and about and being a part of it and seeing these children have friends and learning.”

Speech pathologist

5. School communities are places where all children can thrive and all children should feel welcomed and valued. In order for students to feel welcomed and safe, other students, teachers and the whole community must show respect and accommodations for the students mobility needs, communication methods, self-care needs and education needs. Practical measures such as using and including a child's communication system in and outside class, making the school grounds physically accessible and having positive regard for the school experience of students with disabilities as different but valuable, are all essential features of a successful school experience for any student.

"The accessibility at my (secondary) school was very good. They had ramps everywhere and there were no areas I couldn't get to...At my primary school, accessibility for me was a little bit easier. It was a smaller school, so it was easy to get around. It was quick to get to the disability toilet at my primary school." **Teenager with athetoid cerebral palsy and Complex Communication Needs**

"Well they have ramps, so I just go up the ramps and they're flat so I just go in there. Yes there are stairs, outside the gym. I can't go to the other basketball court because the only way down to bottom basketball court is down steps. I can get down steps, but I have to get my aide...if [the class] go down to the bottom basketball court, I don't go. I just do stuff with my Aide." **Student with CP, spastic quadriplegia and visual impairment**

"It's not anything we think about it's just that's how it is and has always been. [Students] are all treated the same... obviously there are times when he's given a bit more time or things like that. But in saying that he's treated the same as the others, they're all treated in a way where they need to develop and become independent and he's no exclusion to that. And they're all included and I treat him the same as I would any other kid and I don't even think about it. I just make sure that's just what I do. Same thing, the aides know that that's what we do in here as well. They do exactly the same; they mirror everything that I do. In fact it's a school culture really, it's not even just this classroom, it's school wide that's what it should be." **Teacher**



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¹This information sheet has been compiled following a research project called: *Successful school experiences for students with cerebral palsy*. The William Buckland Foundation proudly sponsored the study. Dr Helen Bourke-Taylor, researcher and occupational therapist and Ms Claire Cotter, Manager of Cerebral Palsy Education Centre (CPEC) collaborated to produce the findings contained in this fact sheet. The research project was a qualitative study that involved interviewing 47 people about their perspective of the experience of students with cerebral palsy in local schools. The rigorous research involved analysis of interviews: 7 students; 11 parents; 10 teachers; 9 principals; 10 allied health therapists. This fact sheet is number 5 of a set of 6 fact sheets. Each fact sheet summarises one theme that was derived from the data that represented the collective experience of participants. The factsheets may be downloaded from the CPEC website (<http://www.cpec.org.au/>).